

Executive Summary

Purpose and Need for the Plan

The goal of the backcountry management plan is to describe how the National Park Service will act to provide future generations with a variety of opportunities to experience the Denali backcountry while protecting park wildlife and other park resources. This plan will update and expand the 1976 *Backcountry Management Plan* and, once approved by a Record of Decision, will amend the 1986 *General Management Plan* for Denali National Park and Preserve. This plan will also serve as a Soundscape Preservation and Noise Management Plan as required by Director's Order #47 and as a Commercial Services Plan for the portions of the park covered by the plan. This new plan addresses management of all park and preserve areas not included in the *Entrance Area* and *South Side Development Concept Plans*, including the designated wilderness in the former Mount McKinley National Park, the national park additions, the northwest and southwest national preserve areas, and the park road corridor west of park headquarters during the winter season.

A new backcountry management plan is needed for the following reasons:

- The 1976 backcountry planning document predated ANILCA and the 1986 GMP did not provide detailed guidance about managing backcountry uses in the park additions.
- Visitation has grown dramatically for some backcountry activities, requiring new methods of management.
- Anticipated increases in additional activities are expected in the next 10-15 years.
- Changes in backcountry use require National Park Service action to protect park resources and wilderness character.

Specifically, actions described by this plan should do the following:

- protect and preserve the park's natural and cultural resources and values, including natural soundscapes and intangible values such as solitude;
- provide for the public's maximum freedom of use and enjoyment of the park's backcountry and wilderness in a manner that is consistent with park purposes and the protection of park resources and values;
- define the recreational opportunities provided in Denali's backcountry in the context of a spectrum of recreational opportunities available on public lands in the Denali region (primarily state parks, other state lands, and federal Bureau of Land Management lands);
- ensure all National Park Service management practices and research in the backcountry are consistent with park purposes; and
- provide for the means to achieve public understanding and support of backcountry and wilderness values.

Developing Alternatives

The National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA), other laws, and National Park Service management policies require the National Park Service to examine alternatives for the future management of Denali National Park and Preserve. The alternatives must be reasonable, consistent with the purposes for which Denali was established, consistent with legislative mandates such as the park's enabling legislation, the Alaska National Interest Lands Conservation Act (ANILCA), and the Wilderness Act, and consistent with National Park Service management policies.

The National Park Service consulted and coordinated with numerous agencies, organizations, and interested persons while drafting the Backcountry Management Plan and General Management Plan amendment for Denali National Park and Preserve. The scoping process was initiated with the

September 1999 publication of the “Notice of Intent” to prepare an environmental impact statement in the *Federal Register*. The Special Winter 2001 Edition of the *Denali Dispatch*, Volume 6, Issue #4 was sent to about 1500 addresses on the park mailing list. This document informed the public of the direction the National Park Service was taking with respect to the plan, described the primary activities and a range of alternatives to be evaluated in the EIS, and solicited further public comment.

The National Park Service held open house meetings in Anchorage, Fairbanks, Talkeetna/Trapper Creek, Cantwell, and Healy to help fine-tune the alternatives and impact topics. Approximately 1,650 comments were received, and the National Park Service incorporated most of the ideas presented in these comments into the draft plan. During winter and spring of 2002 the National Park Service held additional open houses and collaborative planning workshops, and met with interested parties to refine the alternatives. The National Park Service provided the Federal Aviation Administration and the state of Alaska with a copy of the internal review draft backcountry management plan in January 2002 and incorporated their comments.

The most recent scientific data available, including mapping of critical wildlife habitat, information from inventory and monitoring, and a wide variety of resource information on Denali National Park and Preserve, were used when developing the alternatives. After careful consultation with park staff and user groups, maps were created for each existing use. The following resource and use information was critical in developing alternatives:

- vegetative cover
- soil type
- cultural resources (archeological sites, mining-related structures, cabins and sites listed on the National Register of Historic Places)
- cabin locations
- streams used by anadromous fish
- bear dens
- wolf dens
- raptor sites
- winter trails
- weather stations
- snow survey sites
- ultraviolet light monitoring site
- glacier study sites
- long-term ecological monitoring sites
- recent fires greater than 1,000 acres
- water quality sites
- swan location sites
- research areas for bear, wolf, birds, caribou, moose, sheep, small mammal, and vegetation studies
- bear incident/encounter sites
- designated and suitable wilderness maps
- earthquake epicenters
- fault maps
- existing uses (mountaineering areas, snowmobile routes, dog mushing routes, skiing routes, horse trails, boating, hiking routes, hunting areas, and scenic air tour routes).

The NPS developed a range of alternatives based on planning objectives, park resources, and public input. Each alternative represents a distinct vision for the park's backcountry. These alternatives describe actions related to management area designation, recreational activities, and administrative activities. Four alternatives in addition to a no-action alternative were developed.

Topics Included in the Alternatives

Wilderness Management	Guided Activities and Commercial Services
Registration and Permits	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Commercial Uses General • Airplane Landings • Hiking • Bicycle Touring • Sport Hunting
Management Areas	Facilities
Management Area Designations	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Trails • Information Facilities, Shelters, and Campsites
General and Non-Commercial Activities	Administration
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Overnight Camping • Airplane Landings • Aircraft Overflights • Snowmobiles • Hiking • Climbing and Mountaineering • Non-Motorized Winter Activities • Bicycle Use • Boating • Pack Animals 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • NPS Administration and Research
	Easements and Boundary Adjustments
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Easements • Land Exchanges
	Wilderness Suitability Review

Management Areas

All action alternatives in the plan would establish management areas for the entire park and preserve. Each management area reflects an overall management concept or vision and provides for a related set of opportunities in the backcountry. Each area is defined by desired visitor experience and resource conditions and by the types and levels of visitor uses, park development, and management activities that would be allowed. Allocation of management areas is a prescriptive process that describes the desired condition rather than the existing condition.

Based on National Park Service management policies, comments received during the early phases of planning, resource information, and use patterns, five major management areas were identified and applied under each alternative in a manner consistent with the vision for that alternative. Descriptions of these areas are summarized below:

Backcountry

This area would be managed to emphasize recreational and aesthetic values. The area feels accessible and frequently visited, but the landscape is still primarily natural with few permanent reminders of human presence. Visitors find solitude most of the time, but they may encounter up to 10 parties per day, and opportunities for solitude are limited during popular use times. Minor resource impacts may be common at access points, but resource impacts are infrequent elsewhere.

Primitive

The area feels remote and rarely visited, as if new discoveries remain to be made. Visitors usually find solitude, but they may encounter up to two parties per day. Travel in this area requires a moderate to very high degree of self-reliance, advance planning, and time commitment. Minor resource impacts may be common at access points, but resource impacts are infrequent elsewhere.

Natural

The area feels remote and unexplored, as if few people have ever visited. Visitors find virtually complete solitude; they encounter no more than three parties per week. Travel in this area requires a high to very high degree of self-reliance, advance planning, and time commitment. Resource impacts are extremely rare or nonexistent.

Old Park Special Resource

The Old Park has a specific history grounded in the preservation of wilderness values and an intact ecosystem. The purposes of this area are to protect that legacy and provide visitors compatible

opportunities to experience it. The Old Park provides opportunities for remote, self-reliant travel and opportunities for solitude, introspection, restoration, and personal growth. Visitors usually find solitude, but they may encounter up to two parties per day. Resource impacts are extremely rare or nonexistent.

Mountaineering Special Use

The purpose of this area is to provide for a mountaineering experience for a large number of users on an established route. This management area allows for established climbing routes, administrative camps, and large base camps, so it has a social feel with many signs of human presence, but still a sense of being very remote in location. Resource impacts may be moderate.

Description of the Alternatives

Each of the alternatives is briefly described below. A more detailed description is available in accompanying Table 2-7: Summary Table of Alternatives.

Alternative A: No Action

The National Park Service would continue the present management direction, guided by the 1986 *General Management Plan*, the 1997 *Entrance Area and Road Corridor Development Concept Plan*, the 1997 *South Side Denali Development Concept Plan*, the 1997 *Strategic Plan*, and backcountry management plans from 1976 and 1982. Recreational use and access patterns would continue to develop and the agency would respond as necessary on a case-by-case basis. No new services or facilities would be developed to meet increased levels of use in the backcountry, except for those identified in the Entrance Area or South Side plans. Current and projected conditions under this alternative provide a baseline for evaluating the changes and impacts of the other action alternatives. For all activities, the National Park Service would respond to changing use patterns as necessary to protect park resources, visitor safety, and visitor experience.

Alternative B

This alternative would emphasize wilderness resource values (including solitude and natural sounds) and opportunities for self-reliant, non-motorized recreation that depend on the wilderness character of the resource. Denali would have a high degree of resource protection, especially in the original Old Park area. Under this alternative, some uses would be reduced or managed for greater dispersal to enhance resource protection. While some new approved uses could occur, services would be minimized to provide self-reliant experiences. This alternative calls for protecting the wilderness character of the park and preserve by expanding motorized access only after Congress acts on new wilderness designation.

Alternative C

This alternative would emphasize highly dispersed recreational uses that are consistent with wilderness values and opportunities for solitude. It would allow for both motorized and non-motorized access for wilderness recreation activities, but would limit growth or otherwise manage use levels to provide a quality visitor experience and protect park resources.

Alternative D (NPS Preferred Alternative)

The NPS would provide for expanded recreational opportunities in many areas of the park and preserve for activities that are particularly well suited to the unique character of Denali. Use levels would not exceed those that maintain the management vision for a particular unit. Patterns and types of use would be somewhat similar to current conditions, but increases in levels of use would be noticeable at several locations.

Alternative E

This alternative would emphasize expanded visitor services, additional facilities, and increased motorized access for backcountry users. A variety of uses would be accommodated throughout the park, and new forms and levels of recreational uses would be allowed in the park additions and preserve, while protecting resources. New facilities would be added in the entrance area and on the south side. There would be some expansion of existing uses in the original Old Park area, with modest expansion of uses in the park additions and preserve. There would be minimal reductions of or redistribution of existing uses even in congested areas. This alternative would allow additional types of use not presently occurring but consistent with laws, regulations, and management policies. As types and levels of use increase, so too would administrative presence.

Environmental Impacts Assessment

The impacts assessment describes the level of magnitude of impacts for actions implemented under each alternative. The cumulative impacts assessment outlines overall impacts resulting from past, current, proposed, and reasonably foreseeable management actions. The impacts assessment guides the decision-maker in choosing a management action based on an objective understanding of environmental consequences of each alternative.

The existing environment and the current conditions of important resources and values of Denali National Park and Preserve that would be affected by any of the five alternatives in the plan include the following: Physical resources, vegetation and wetlands, wildlife and fish, natural soundscape, wilderness, cultural resources, socioeconomic, recreational opportunities and visitor experience, and park operations and management.

Alternative A — No Action

Alternative A would result in impairment of wilderness character and natural soundscapes and would result in significant degradation of wildlife and vegetation resources. Most of the anticipated impacts relate to deterioration of natural sound conditions; the presence of reminders of human civilization, such as mechanized vehicles; encounters with other people and large groups of people; and signs of human presence, such as social trails, campsites, and human waste. These negative impacts would constitute a failure in achieving the purpose of the Organic Act to preserve the environment for succeeding generations and to preserve the important natural aspects of the nation's heritage.

Alternative B

This alternative would attain a wide range of beneficial uses of the environment in the form of wilderness recreational opportunity without significant degradation of important park resources such as wildlife and wilderness that are identified in Denali's enabling legislation. This alternative would achieve a reasonable balance between population and resource use that allows for positive socioeconomic benefits for local communities and the opportunity for diverse recreational opportunities. While this alternative would provide for less diversity of access to wilderness recreational opportunities than other alternatives, overall impacts to air and water quality, vegetation and wetlands, wildlife, and cultural resources would be negligible, and wilderness and natural soundscape would benefit from actions proposed in this alternative.

Alternative C

This alternative would attain a wide range of beneficial uses of the environment in the form of wilderness recreational opportunities without significant degradation of important park resources such as wildlife and wilderness that are identified in Denali's enabling legislation. This alternative would achieve a reasonable balance between population and resource use that allows for positive socioeconomic benefits for local communities and the opportunity for diverse recreational opportunities. Vegetation, wildlife, natural soundscape in the winter, and cultural resources would experience only minor adverse effects.

Alternative D — NPS Preferred Alternative

This alternative would attain a wide range of beneficial uses of the environment in the form of wilderness recreational opportunity without significant degradation of important park resources such as wildlife and wilderness that are identified in Denali's enabling legislation. This alternative would achieve a reasonable balance between population and resource use that allows for positive socioeconomic benefits for local communities and the opportunity for diverse recreational opportunities. Impacts to physical resources, vegetation, and wildlife would generally be minor to moderate. Natural soundscape and wilderness would experience minor to moderate beneficial and adverse affects, depending on location.

Alternative E

This alternative would provide quality wilderness recreational opportunities for some users and enhance socioeconomic benefits, while failing to provide quality experiences for other user groups. This alternative would fail to attain the widest range of beneficial uses of the national park and preserve and could allow significant degradation in several park resources. Wildlife, vegetation, natural soundscapes, and wilderness would all suffer at least a moderate level of decline under this alternative, although not to the point that they are impaired.

Table 2-8: Summary Table of Impacts provides more detail on impacts from each of the alternatives.